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**Psalm 38:17–18 ESV**

*<sup>17</sup> I am on the verge of collapse,  
facing constant pain.*

*<sup>18</sup> But I confess my sins;  
I am deeply sorry for what I have done.*

***On the verge of collapse: Living Forgiveness.***

One day, when I was eleven, I believe, I was in my parents' front yard, raking leaves. Our house was quite small, but we lived on a corner lot and had a lot of grass and a few big trees. I was the youngest and so my job was to mow each week, to water, to weed, and each Fall, to rake. I remember having a big pile built up; I liked seeing how much of the yard's worth of leaves I could rake into a single pile. I was actively raking when I heard a man's voice shouting at me. It was something like "*Don't move. Drop the rake and put your hands up!*" I'm quite serious. I looked up – and it was a uniformed cop, leveling what I think was a .38 at me. He was a young man. I did indeed drop the rake and I shot my hands into the air. He was about ten feet from me, and I noticed that he was trying to keep his anger under control. His expression was eerie: he looked like he really didn't like me. My father had come out of the house, and he slipped in between the cop

and me. My father told the officer, in a loud but calm voice, that everything was okay, that his son would cooperate.

The officer told my father in a controlled voice that he was going to have to step aside. My father moved out of the way, and as he stepped aside, I could see that my dad was looking at the officer's gun. My father repeated: whatever has happened, my son will cooperate. The conversation between my father and the officer went on for a while, with my father asking the officer to please lower his gun, that his son had been raking, and whatever happened, I had nothing to do with it. The officer asked my father how long I had been there raking. My father pointed at the big pile of leaves and said for at least a couple of hours, and that I was a straight-A student at the Catholic school and would never do anything wrong. The officer kept the gun on me as my father asked him what had happened. The officer said that a vicious crime had just been committed by some kid. I could see the officer's expression change subtly; he was beginning to wonder if I was the right boy. The officer told my father that he was going to arrest me. I'll get back to this. It ended with me still alive.

Let's look at Jesus' sermon on the Mountain, specifically from Chapter 6 of Matthew. In this long discourse, Jesus describes what it means to truly be a believer. He explains how believers should treat each other. Every Sunday we

recite the Lord's Prayer from the Sermon on the Mount. I like to remind us that Jesus taught us this prayer himself. Notice what it says leading up to the prayer, how Jesus tells people they should pray:

*<sup>5</sup> "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. <sup>7</sup> "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. <sup>9</sup> Pray then like this:*

Jesus then says the prayer that we have named after him:

*"Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
<sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
<sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread,  
<sup>12</sup> and forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
<sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.*

Prayer is a private communication between us and God, and it is not something offered publicly because we want people to think that we are holy. Indeed, the real test of prayer is when it is just God and us – and no one else is around.

There is something more that is very serious in this section of the Sermon on the Mount. Consider what Jesus says right after the Lord's Prayer:

*14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

Jesus reminds us that to earn God's forgiveness, we must first forgive others. This is an inflexible requirement. That is the part of the prayer that Jesus chooses to repeat – because it is so important for us to remember. And it's not just that forgiving is a requirement of being forgiven: It's also that forgiving others is a test to see if we are genuine believers. It is one of the biggest challenges in the life of a Christian - to truly live by this. A Christian always has forgiveness in their heart. It is a process, not something that happens in an instant, the first time we decide to live with forgiveness. When something happens, and we sense bitterness rising in our hearts, we remind ourselves that this is what we believe. If we are dedicated and refuse to become embittered or vengeful, no matter what someone does to us, two things change inside of us. First, forgiveness becomes second nature: we find ourselves immediately making it clear to a party expressing regret that we have no hardness in our hearts. And second, each day becomes freer, calmer, more joyous than the day before.

Consider verses 17 to 22 from Psalm 38:

*17 I am on the verge of collapse,  
facing constant pain.*

*18 But I confess my sins;*

*I am deeply sorry for what I have done.*  
<sup>19</sup> *I have many aggressive enemies;  
they hate me without reason.*  
<sup>20</sup> *They repay me evil for good  
and oppose me for pursuing good.*  
<sup>21</sup> *Do not abandon me, O LORD.  
Do not stand at a distance, my God.*  
<sup>22</sup> *Come quickly to help me,  
O Lord my savior.*

We do say the Lord's Prayer in church. The Israelites and then Jews had a strong practice of reciting and singing pieces of Hebrew Scripture in their services. The Psalms were prayers and were very frequently repeated, and they were also the backbone of every individual's daily prayer. The first part of this Psalm is a reminder that if we have done wrong, we will be on the verge of collapse. We will be in constant pain because we're holding something terrible inside of us. The answer? We need to admit what we have done wrong, express regret, and do what we can to make things right with whomever we have wronged - and with God. I'll get back to the last part of this Psalm fragment. But let's summarize what Scripture has taught us up to this point – first, that when we have wronged somebody, we're in a state of anxiety until we confront what we have done, and second, that we must live with forgiveness, that it must be an integral part of us.

So, back to that police officer, whom I learned later was relatively new at his job. After my father and the officer spoke to each other for a minute or so,

which of course seemed like forever, the officer nodded at me. He told me to relax, that he would not hurt me, as long as I did indeed cooperate. Then, another officer, a man who was older, came jogging up. He told the first officer to “stand down”, that the kid who had attacked the older lady had been caught down the street, that they had him in cuffs. It was then that the young officer holstered his gun – and suddenly looked very embarrassed. He told my father that he was very sorry. He turned to me and said that he didn’t mean to scare me. The second officer explained that the kid they had just arrested did look a lot like me, and his partner was working off a description of that boy. The woman had been robbed and thrown to the ground – and had a serious head injury. I heard the siren of an approaching ambulance.

My father said that everything was okay, that we both understood. I of course followed suit and said that I was fine, no problem. The young officer and his partner walked away. I did not see the kid they had arrested, and later, when someone told me his name, I didn’t recognize it. Later that evening, our doorbell rang. My father answered – and it was the young cop. He was still in uniform. He asked my father if he could please speak to his son. My father called for me. The officer said that he had just finished his shift, and that he had been thinking about me. He said that he had little kids at home and how terrible he would feel if one

of them had been treated like that when he had done nothing wrong. He said that he couldn't go home without making sure I was okay and apologizing one more time. I thanked him for coming by and said I realized he was doing his job and that I looked like the boy who had hurt the woman. I asked him how the woman was doing. The officer said that she was in the hospital, but that it didn't look good. Then my father nudged me and said, "and what else?" I looked at him. "What are you going to say to someone who just apologized to you?" said my father. "Huh?" Then I remembered. I told the officer that I forgave him, and that I didn't even consider there to be anything necessary to forgive. My father smiled and nodded.

There is a bit of a twist on the forgiveness lesson that I would like to offer: forgiveness is a three-way thing. It involves someone apologizing, or perhaps not apologizing at all, and in fact, perhaps remaining defiant and refusing to admit any wrong. The second person is the one who forgives. The third party is God – and God wants for us to forgive. God is especially appreciative if we have forgiven someone who hasn't even apologized, and when there was something truly wrong that happened. Then God blesses us. That is the glorious moment, when God touches us with a deep, powerful, eternal grace.

Let's get to the second part of that Psalm fragment. It's a little odd.

*19 I have many aggressive enemies;  
they hate me without reason.  
20 They repay me evil for good  
and oppose me for pursuing good.  
21 Do not abandon me, O LORD.  
Do not stand at a distance, my God.  
22 Come quickly to help me,  
O Lord my savior.*

I don't like to use Scripture out of context, and so I want to point out that the original purpose of this passage is to tell us that if we do wrong, we are going to suffer. It's a brutal message. It says that if we do wrong, and we don't try to make it right, God will come down on us hard. In this Psalm, God uses other people to make the sinful person suffer, as we often see in the Old Testament. But there is something else we can get from this Psalm today – there are people in our world who are here to serve us, and who find themselves being repaid with evil. We should lift our hearts for police officers and other first responders. I see police officers at the hospital bringing people into the emergency room. It is officers who are the first ones on the scene when someone is run over by a car while crossing the street, who is shot, or who falls off a ladder, or is beaten by a spouse, or is in a horrific car crash. Police officers bring overdosed drug addicts and frightened runaways to the hospital. I always see these officers acting with kindness and empathy. Part of living with forgiveness is being proactive and not

waiting until there is something to forgive. We offer grace to people, especially to those who are suffering, who give more than they receive, or who clearly have big hearts for others. Grace and forgiveness come together naturally. Remember that I said that forgiveness first becomes a natural part of us, something that we don't have to consciously offer up, that it rises in our hearts on its own. And second, living this way brings daily joy. There is a third thing that happens when we live with forgiveness: we start taking that grace that God gives us and offering it to others without even thinking about it.

Much later in the Gospel of Matthew, in Chapter 18, Jesus is giving another sermon. It is often called the *Discourse on the Church*. Jesus is offering some private instruction to his Apostles, focusing on being modest, taking care of those in need, protecting those who are vulnerable, and most of all, being forgiving:

*<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

This passage sounds poetic, but there is something deeper here. At the time of Jesus, there was an ancient Israelite tradition later described in the Talmud that a person who has done something wrong must ask for forgiveness three times, and so the person offering forgiveness only needs to give it three times. So, in our passage with Peter and Jesus, Peter thinks he's being very generous by suggesting

that he would forgive someone seven times. This is a powerful number because in ancient Israelite culture and in Hebrew Scripture, seven represented perfection or completeness. Jesus tells him, no, that this is now insufficient. Under the New Covenant, we must forgive 77 times: this means our forgiveness must be infinite.

So, that is our standard as followers of Christ. Forgiveness is a core aspect of our identities. It's not a limited, finite, restricted sort of thing. It is boundless. There is an important distinction. We can learn to forgive, but we cannot expect our minds to forget. When we can, when it is appropriate, we work to resolve differences, so that we can get along with people who might otherwise end up our enemies or people with whom we refuse to communicate. Harmony is often the result of forgiveness. So, our forgiveness can expand beyond us. Not only does the way we treat others propagate through society, teaching others to be forgiving and thereby living with a powerful sense of calm, but we also help to create a stable, collaborative, constructive society. This underscores one of the most impressive aspects of the Christian faith: it teaches us ways to live in peace and friendship with we each other. Living counter to the teachings of Jesus means living in a way that ultimately leads to cultural collapse. And today, humankind is in some ways on the verge of collapse because we do not forgive 77 times.